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SUBJECT: GVN REPORT ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REF: HANOI 582

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¶1. (SBU) On March 10, the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) sent the Ambassador a report on religious conditions in Vietnam in 2005 (unofficial translation in paragraph 4). The first part of the report lists Vietnam's achievements in promoting religious freedom in 2005, and the second part focuses on developments for Protestants across different regions. The report recognizes that Vietnam's record is not perfect, but ultimately concludes that, one year after the promulgation of the Ordinance on Religion and the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism, Vietnam's religious conditions are better than ever.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: While we agree that conditions for religious believers in Vietnam have significantly improved over the past twelve months, the CRA report is more interesting for what it omits rather than what it reports. While making clear that much work remains to be done in the Northwest Highlands, the report avoids comment on the CRA's notable failure to induce local authorities there to follow the GVN's religious policies, particularly as they pertain to the registration of EVCN sub-congregations. It also glosses over a number of unresolved problems in the Central Highlands and elsewhere in southern and central Vietnam, including the continuing closure of some SECV "meeting points," local-level harassment of house churches and a slow and uneven process of registration and recognition of church organizations, particularly those affiliated with ethnic minority groups.

¶3. (SBU) Comment, cont'd: The report also does not indicate whether any local officials were reprimanded or punished for violating the rights of religious believers. Furthermore, it does not address continuing tensions in the Hoa Hao community, the banning of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) or the long-pending request of the Catholic Church to open another seminary in Dong Nai Province. (Note: These last three issues were not part of the May 2005 exchange of letters. End Note.) According to the CRA, this report is meant to be the province-by-province breakdown of achievements in religious freedom that the CRA promised to provide to Ambassador Hanford during his recent visit (reftel), but does not meet that requirement. Nevertheless, the fact that the CRA provided us with this report shows an effort on their part to be responsive to our religious freedom concerns. End comment.

¶4. (SBU) Begin unofficial translation of text:

TITLE: Religious Situation in Vietnam after One Year of Implementation of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and

the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism.

Vietnam is a multi-religion and multi-ethnicity nation of more than 80 million people from 54 ethnic groups. There are six religions with about 20 million believers, 60,000 clergy and priests, 22,000 places of worship. Sixteen religious organizations have been recognized, which are operating in a normal manner. They are: the Catholic Church of Vietnam, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN), the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, nine Cao Dai Churches and two Muslim Representative Boards.

After one year of implementation of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the Prime Minister's Instruction, new developments regarding religious life in Vietnam have been achieved.

I. Religious activities, including rites of worship and celebrations of major religious events, were conducted in a normal manner. Celebrations of Buddha's birthday, Christmas, foundation anniversaries of Cao Dai and Hoa Hao Buddhism and the observance of Ramadan all were conducted in a solemn and respectful manner according to religious rituals, attracting a large number of participants and ensuring safety.

In 2005, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha held rites of prayers for those who sacrificed themselves during national resistances, as well as common people who died of hunger in 1945.

The Episcopal Council of Vietnam conducted the 27th La Vang pilgrimage festival that attracted tens of thousands of participants; Catholic diocese and churches nationwide conducted prayer sessions for Pope John Paul II; a delegation of the Catholic Church of Vietnam traveled to

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Rome to attend his funeral and the installation of Benedict XVI.

The ECVN held its 50th founding anniversary celebration, conducting the General Spiritual Assembly for pastors, preachers, lay preachers and believers. Christmas was observed at numerous Catholic and Protestant communities in remote places, especially in Central Highland localities where many ethnic believers live.

Generally speaking, major religious events were celebrated in a more solemn manner, attracting a large number of participants who showed trust in the Party's and State's religious policies.

II. Religious organizations were more pro-active with respect to their own organizational consolidation, promotions, appointments and transfers of religious clergy and priests, according to their organizations' charters and legal provisions. The Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam named additional personnel to a number of functional departments affiliated with their Executive Council, as well as provincial departments for Buddhist Affairs; a number of new provincial departments of Buddhist affairs were established.

The Catholic Church of Vietnam split the Xuan Loc Diocese into Xuan Loc Diocese in Dong Nai Province, and Ba Ria Diocese in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province, the 26th Catholic diocese in Vietnam.

With the approval of the Prime Minister, the Vatican appointed Bishop Ngo Quang Kiet to be Archbishop of Hanoi; Xuan Loc Auxiliary Bishop Nguyen Van Tram to be Bishop of Ba Ria; Coadjutor Bishop Nguyen Thanh Hoan to be Bishop of Phan Thiet; Priest Le Van Hong to be Auxiliary Archbishop of Hue; Priest Vo Duc Minh to be Coadjutor Bishop of Nha Trang; and Priest Nguyen Van De to be Auxiliary Bishop of Bui Chu.

In 2005, the SECV conducted its General Assembly for the period of 2005-2009.

Other religious organizations such as Tien Thien and Chon Ly Cao Dai Churches conducted congresses for their new administrative terms, appointing dignitaries and additional personnel to their executive boards at provinces.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist Church consolidated executive boards at the grassroots level following its second-term congress.

The An Giang provincial Muslim Representative Board was established and began operation.

According to formal statistics, some 800 priests received nominations and promotions; 605 priests received appointments; and 337 priests were transferred.

III. Activities to train religious dignitaries and priests were maintained and expanded. Buddhist schools at the intermediate and higher level received high numbers of enrollment in the new school year. Buddhist academies are accelerating preparations for the expansion of facilities and improvement of training quality. Specially, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha is working on a plan to build up an Academy on Khmer Hinayana Buddhism, which is supported by local authorities. Catholic seminaries enrolled larger numbers of students: the Hanoi Seminary now enrolls students every year (instead of every two years), and the Sao Bien Seminary in Nha Trang (of Khanh Hoa Province) opened short-term classes for elderly priests to complete their training. The SECV-affiliated Institute of Bible and Theology opened a second training course, and enrollments doubled the number of students attending the first course. The SECV Executive Board also opened classes for ethnic pastors, preachers and lay preachers who had not received training in Gia Lai, Dak Nong and Dak Lak provinces. Classes on Hoa Hao Buddhist philosophy were conducted, attracting a high number of attendees. The An Giang provincial and Ho Chi Minh City Muslim Representative Boards facilitated traveling to Mecca of a number of Muslim believers and conducted a Koran reading contest.

In 2005, 6,963 students graduated from schools run by religious organizations; the number of new enrollments was 5,584, and the current number of attendees is 4,563.

IV. Publication of the Bible, prayer books and other religious materials was maintained and met religious demand. In 2005, the Publishing House for Religious Materials issued permission for the publishing of 450 major items, with more

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than one million copies, and more than 60 other publications. The ECVN received permission to publish its monthly Fellowship Journal.

1V. Expanded international relations with religious organizations was encouraged and supported. At the beginning of the year, a Buddhist delegation from France led by the Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh returned to visit Vietnam at the invitation of the International Buddhist Affairs Department affiliated with the VBS. The delegation spent three months in Vietnam, conducting religious activities at places in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue and Binh Dinh Province. A delegation of various Vietnamese religious dignitaries attended the ASEM Belief Exchange in Bali of Indonesia. VBS sent a delegation of dignitaries to attend the 4th Buddhist Summit Conference in Thailand. VBS delegations paid visits to Cambodia and Laos to hold talks on Buddhist affairs. VBS received and held talks with many Buddhist and international delegations to discuss Buddhist affairs in Vietnam.

The Episcopal Council of Vietnam joined the Asian Episcopal

Council and sent a delegation to attend the Young Catholics Assembly. A Vatican delegation led by Cardinal Sepe visited Vietnam at the invitation of the Episcopal Council of Vietnam and attended a number of religious activities in the dioceses they visited.

Relations between the An Giang provincial and Ho Chi Minh City Muslim Representative Boards with regional Muslim organizations have been encouraged; there have been some exchanges involving visits and financial assistance for the reconstruction of places of worship and scholarships.

In 2005, 334 dignitaries and priests went abroad to attend conferences, classes and religious activities.

VI. Charitable activities by religious organizations were encouraged, with good results. Religious organizations actively participated in social, charitable and educational projects. Tens of thousands of people, including the elderly, orphans, disadvantaged people and HIV-AIDS patients enjoyed free medical care and treatment at various establishments run by individual dignitaries/priests or religious organizations.

VII. Local authorities facilitated requests concerning the renovation, upgrading and construction of facilities belonging to places of religious worship. Just within one year, quite a number of Buddhist temples, churches and religious places were upgraded or built. Notably, land has been located for a number of Protestant congregations in Central Highlands for the construction of churches.

According to formal statistics, in 2005, 242 establishments of belief and religious worship were built; 320 establishments were upgraded and renovated.

VIII. Apart from formally recognized religious organizations, a number of new religious organizations and denominations, operating in a normal manner, conducted religious activities at nearly 500 places of religious worship and meeting points, and have 1.5 million believers and over 5,000 dignitaries, priests and lay men. These not-yet-recognized organizations include various Protestant denominations, "Serene and Pure Land" Buddhist Association, "Tu An Hieu Nghia" and the Bahai. The Government Committee on Religious Affairs has been coordinating efforts with local authorities to conduct examinations, working on instructions regarding registration of religious activities, which may facilitate recognition according to provisions of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief.

**TITLE:** Situation of Protestantism in Vietnam after One Year of Implementation of the Prime Minister's Instruction.

**SUB-HEADING:** Regarding the Central Highlands (including Five Central Highlands Provinces and Binh Phuoc Province):

During one year of implementation of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, and especially the Prime Minister's Instruction, religious activities by Protestant believers in the five central highlands provinces and Binh Phuoc Province took place in accordance with legal provisions.

Twelve SECV-affiliated Protestant congregations were recognized; the total number of State-sanctioned Protestant congregations in the region is now fifty.

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Seventeen sub-congregations have been established in Dak Nong Province, which are expected to be recognized after six months.

Some 684 Protestant groups have registered for activities and permanent meeting points with authorities at the grassroots level.

Three theological classes opened for thirty-five participants from Dak Lak Province, forty-six from Gia Lai Province and thirty-two from Dak Nong Province. Two classes will be opened in Binh Phuoc and Lam Dong provinces.

Land has been allocated for the construction of churches for five congregations, including three in Dak Lak Province and two in Gia Lai Province; churches affiliated with Betel congregation in Ia Hru commune, Chu Se district and Gia Lai Province were inaugurated.

Authorities are considering an SECV request to publish the Bible in ethnic languages, such as Jarai, Ede and Bana languages.

SUB-HEADING: Up to December 2005, in the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc Province region:

Fifty congregations have been recognized. Seventeen sub-congregations have been recognized. 684 groups have registered for activities and permanent meeting points with authorities at grassroots level.

The majority of SECV-affiliated Protestants in the Central Highlands were able to practice their faith according to the Ordinance on Belief and Religion and the Prime Minister's Instruction.

In addition, authorities of Central Highlands provinces have guided the registration of activities and meeting points for a number of unrecognized Adventist and Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) groups.

In 2005, local authorities guided and facilitated solemn and peaceful Christmas celebrations at meeting points, and for congregations and sub-congregations.

The Government Committee on Religious Affairs conducted training classes on Protestantism for officials at the grassroots level, and promoted the consideration process regarding recognition of congregations and sub-congregations and registration of meeting points of Protestant groups.

SUB-HEADING: Regarding the Northern Mountainous Region (Northwest Highlands):

Results in implementing the Ordinance and the Instructions:

- Built a working plan to implement the Prime Minister's Instructions regarding Protestantism in the Northwestern region.

- Provided provinces with guidance on how to facilitate religious activities at home.

- Prepared training documents for local cadres, while working on instructions for authorities at the grassroots level regarding registration of activities by religious organizations in the second and third quarters of 2006.

SUB-HEADING: Regarding the ECVN:

- Provided guidance on legal procedures concerning their request for a land use rights certificate with respect to the property at 2 Ngo Tram (Note: This is the ECVN's headquarters in Hanoi. End Note).

- Provided guidance on procedure regarding the re-establishment of Thanh Hoa Protestant Church.

- Facilitated appointments of pastors-in-charge for Haiphong, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Ha Nam, Phuc Yen and Ha Tay congregations.

- Approved the publication of the Church's monthly Fellowship Journal.

--Provided guidance on procedures for the establishment of Thuy Nguyen sub-congregation affiliated with Haiphong Church and Ha Long sub-congregation affiliated with Quang Ninh Church.

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--Located land for Bac Son congregation (in Lang Son Province) to construct a church.

CONCLUSION: In short, after one year of implementation of the Ordinance and the Instruction, Vietnam's religious conditions have significantly improved. Despite the fact that there were difficulties in some locations at some points, both in terms of religious activities and State-management, the significant progress in terms of religious activity confirmed the fact that Vietnam's policies of respecting freedom of religion and belief have come into life. Quite a number of believers and those among the clergy are enjoying the insurance of State policies and laws; [and are] working toward a "good life, good religion" motto, contributing to the construction and defense of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, for the sake of a "rich people, strong country, and just, democratic and civilized society." End unofficial translation.

MARINE